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**RELIGION IN AMERICA AND LIBERAL
MONISM: RICHARD J. NEUHAUS AND THE CHALLENGE
OF REASONED FAITH. INTRODUCTION**

It is impossible to understand the United States without reference to its religious legacy, or, to put it better, without biblical narrative being its indispensable story. The dramatic transformation of this narrative today constitutes an integral part of understanding what America has been, and where it is going. Biblical Christianity is without doubt a constitutive part of the story of American freedom, because the American Enlightenment, so different from the French anti-Christian project, recognized Christianity and religion in general as an important part of the creation of the United States. Europe, at least its Western part, today in general represents an ocean of “metaphysical boredom”, with the human rights doctrine as the avowed basis of its civilization, yet lacking any deeper justification as to why it should be considered a living “faith”.

The United States of America is a country in which religious, biblical imagery still permeates politics and public language, even if transformed into the form of civil religion, a robust heroic “faith” of American destiny. The First Amendment to the American Constitution, a subject of interpretative legal and political struggles, forbade the establishment of a state Church, but guaranteed free religious activity in the public sphere. Different denominations, churches, synagogues, and recently mosques, various sects have been part of the American drama from the beginning, not as public square ornaments but as important, legitimate shapers of the nation’s destiny and its identity. This religious American story has been a fascinating phenomenon to observe.

During the last sixty years the United States has been subjected to the colossal changes of the civil rights revolution and the countercultural turmoil of the 1960s, including a profound anthropological change incorporated into the very core of traditional liberalism. Liberalism accepted the idea of the autonomous imperial Self as a basis of right, turning itself gradually from a limited doctrine of political and economic arrangements of free people into a monistic ideology which might threaten freedom. It has put enormous pressure on the entire human activity within its sphere of operation, to conform to liberalism's pre-political assumptions treated increasingly as a *sine qua non* condition of the only legitimate behavior of its citizens.¹ Whether such pre-political axioms have been present in the liberal doctrine from the beginning, irrespective of how diverse philosophers conceived of them, or they constitute an outcome of a relatively new incorporation into liberalism of the New Left "philosophy" of "emancipation" from any conceivable, public or private "oppression", is beside the point. Liberalism became an official ideology of Western society, and American society at that, during the latter half of the 20th century, and set the stage for a tremendous conflict, branded imprecisely today as "culture wars".

Such an evolution of liberalism coincided with a period of a tremendous religious turmoil, with a corresponding search within churches for a proper response to the changes, a need for a new language of communication and orthodoxy in conditions of growing dissolution of the traditional paradigm of the American political and cultural code. All of that corresponded with a relative decline in the United States' standing in the world, and a more or less subconscious creeping in of cultural self-doubt, a sense of cultural melancholia, which, so far, refuses to go away. Religious life, mainly biblical religiosity, with its myriad of denominations, has been part of these dramatic changes with discussions and transformations.

Richard John Neuhaus was one of the most important liberal public theologians of the 20th century, probably the most prominent in America after Reinhold Niebuhr and John Courtney Murray, who were active in the middle of the 20th century. He stood right at the very center of these dramatic changes and debates from the very beginning, while shaping culture and public policies significantly. His focus was mainly on biblical, transcendental, revealed religions and their role in the American, or more generally, in the liberal public square. Neuhaus argued that what was at stake at this hour of late modernity was in fact not the fate of Christianity, but the very survival of the idea of freedom, the source of the great creativity and ongoing potential of Western civilization. He argued that Christian anthropology constituted the greatest security of human dignity in liberal democracy.

Neuhaus's life was one of passion, since he was one of those Christians acutely aware that the times in which he lived were not ordinary times. At ease with the world and with people of all walks of life, he knew where the real anchor was, a living embodiment of a truth found in the old maps of Christian antiquity, where

¹ See: A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame 1981.

Jerusalem was put at the center – the *axis mundi*, a blatant cartographical error, but a theological truth. Few of his contemporaries wrote with such sweep and passion about the beauty of the world as a beauty of Christian hope. Neuhaus knew that Christian orthodoxy is a mirror of the world as it is, that Christianity is the great exponent of reality. At a time of great disenchantment, Neuhaus was one of the greatest apologists of Christendom. After Belloc, he could proclaim

For if God is not, then all falsehoods, though each prove the rest false, are each true, and every evil is its own good, and there is confusion everywhere. But if God is, then the world can stand.²

Born in 1936 in Canada, Neuhaus became a Lutheran pastor in 1960. Understanding his calling radically, he engaged in one of the most transforming events of American history, the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and '60s, becoming one of the collaborators of Martin Luther King. Together with the Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel and the radical Catholic priest Daniel Berrigan, Neuhaus founded the committee "Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam", the most visible pacifist organization, part of the radical anti-war civil disobedience movement, "the Movement", as it was then called. He was arrested on many occasions for acts of civil disobedience, both during his civil rights activities and for his anti-war protests.³ In the 1970s the ways of Neuhaus and "the Movement" parted. His journey from the left to the right was a personal odyssey caused by the reflection that the world around him was moving in a direction which seemed to him dangerous and corrupting. Many things contributed to that change. The ideologization of the Democratic Party, with radical feminism and the demand for the legalization of abortion, were the most important. The party of "the little guy" turned out to be the party ready to "kill the little guy". Neuhaus considered this to be a betrayal of true American liberalism, the essence of which was always an enlargement of community under care and legal protection.⁴ The Supreme Court "Roe vs Wade" decision of 1973, declaring abortion a constitutional right, was for him a decisive turnaround, to limit a community for which we take responsibility. The generation which professed a fight with discrimination and for the rights of the weakest decided to seal into law a new discrimination depriving the weakest of society's protection. Neuhaus's faith in liberal ideas prompted him to engage in the pro-life

² Quoted in: R. R. Reilly, *Soul Provider*, "The American Spectator", November 2010, p. 79.

³ He was also a McCarthy delegate to the 1968 Democratic Convention, and a radical candidate for Congress. It was then that he also wrote the essay *The Thorough Revolutionary*, in which he proclaimed: "A revolution of consciousness, no doubt. A cultural revolution, certainly. A nonviolent revolution, perhaps. An armed overthrow of the existing order, it may be necessary. Revolution for the hell of it or revolution for a new world, but revolution, Yes". Quoted in: J. Bottum, *I Measure Every Grief I Meet*, "First Things", April 2009, p. 24. Involvement in the McCarthy campaign and the above manifesto show how radical, by American standards, he was then.

⁴ In one of his editorials about abortion, Neuhaus stated: "The pro-abortion flag is being planted on the wrong side of the liberal-conservative divide. It ought to be those heartless conservatives who want to define the fetus as a meaningless lump of tissue; it ought to be caring liberals who want to expand the community of care to embrace the unborn". Ibidem, p. 24.

movement, which he compared to the civil rights revolution. He became one of the most vocal defenders of the pro-life cause. But that was a move to the conservative side as well. Neuhaus realized that something more fundamental was taking place. The very anthropology of the liberal discourse changed, and with that the classical definition of truth, the basis of all previous discussions about civil rights. The old liberalism took it for granted that we all speak the same moral language, rooted in an objective morality of natural rights, symbolically written into the American Declaration of Independence. The new anthropology was based on the imperial Self. The will became a basis of entitlements and eventually of right, and with that human dignity came to be a human dignity of the imperial Self, not of a person who was tied to a moral world which protected him and at the same time imposed duties towards oneself and the community, creating bonds of mutual obligation and solidarity. If so, not only was liberalism radically transformed, but the American liberalism of the founders as well. American culture and institutions were immediately put under pressure to transform according to the same imperative. Rights began increasingly to be treated as a province not of a universe of moral obligation into which we enter to serve and be served, but as power, an entitlement against the community.

The American ethic of individual merit and personal responsibility gave way to a demand not for justice expressed in equal constitutional rights, but justice understood as equality, and as a claim on the state. A sense of guilt, coupled with the traditional American flagellation and messianism in action, caused an expansion of the federal state, taking on more and more tasks to rectify past wrongs towards different groups and applying remedial policies. Neuhaus saw consequences of these in his role as a Lutheran pastor of a poor parish of St. John in Brooklyn, which he led from 1961 to 1978. He realized there how demoralizing federal policies had become, destroying industriousness, self-help and civil engagement. Wrongly conceived welfare bred waste, apathy, the destruction of poor families and a wave of crime.⁵ Neuhaus, who had been a supporter of the Democratic Party, began to move towards the Republican Party, recognizing the benefits of the socially oriented free market. He also discovered that his observations about the welfare state⁶ had always been an important part of the Catholic social doctrine of subsidiarity.

In the 1970s, the dramatic cultural changes wrought conceptually in the '60s began to be felt. The imperial Self anthropology was slowly transforming the perception of reality, laws and institutions, influencing American Christianity as well. Neuhaus was in the middle of this transformative process within the Lutheran Church. He began to leave behind him the radical social past and an exclusive focus on charity as a way to God, which he realized was leading to subordinating God to progressive causes. This brought him to the Catholic Church and away from the mainline Protestant Churches.⁷ In 1991, Neuhaus was ordained as a Catholic priest.

⁵ This was an observation first brought to media attention in 1965 by the so called Moynihan report.

⁶ Which he published with Peter Berger in the pamphlet *To Empower People* in 1977.

⁷ R. J. Neuhaus, *How I Became the Catholic I Was*, "First Things", April 2002.

Neuhaus joined the Catholic Church at a dramatic time for it. The largest single denomination in the United States, it was in a middle of a commotion caused by *aggiornamento*. Moreover, Protestant anti-Catholicism gave way to the anti-Catholicism of secular liberalism. American liberalism began to change its character, moving, roughly speaking, from a traditional pluralistic liberalism within the confines of federalism and autonomy of mediating structures, into monistic liberalism, an ideology which absorbed the New Left doctrine of “emancipation” and the new anthropology of the radical imperial Self. The natural right interpretation of the “pursuit of happiness” from the Declaration of Independence was abandoned, and an anthropology inimical to a transcendental and revealed faith began to reign.

The Catholic Church found itself right on the front line of this new cultural battle. When the cultural conservative writer Pieter Viereck remarked in 1960 that “Catholic baiting is the anti-Semitism of the liberals” he was anticipating the new intellectual, political and legal sport of “emancipation” played by the liberals.⁸ With the mainline Protestant professing the liberal social gospel and pacified, and the fundamentalists cornered until the 1970s in the backwater of the “Bible Belt”, it was the Catholic Church which found itself cast in the role of the main adversary of liberal culture. In turn, the Church itself was experiencing a dramatic split between its orthodox and liberal wings in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. It was pressurised to conform to the general trend of liberalization of Protestant churches and to become just a “spiritual” department of the progressive causes, abandoning any pretence to shaping the terms of the public moral debate. After the “Roe vs Wade” decision of the Supreme Court in 1973 establishing the new liberal doctrine of the imperial Self as a source of moral judgment, the Catholic Church, still clinging to the moral orthodoxy of its teachings, began to be pushed out of the public square together with other churches. The secular public square was to be the only civilized and legitimate way to conduct the business of liberal democracy.

The liberal left elites began to treat religion increasingly as a problematic feature of the public square, redefining the traditional understanding of the First Amendment. Freedom of religion was being defined as freedom from religion in the public square. There was additionally a sinister twist to that new interpretation. Religious public presence began to be defined as a menace to the public square, a kind of criminalization by association operation. By attaching to religion the label of an irrational phenomenon prone to violence, and inimical to rational public discussion, this symbolic violence provided additional reasons why religions should be pushed out of the public square.⁹ This new liberalism’s definition of the public

⁸ W. Herberg, *Religion in a Secularized Society: Some Aspects of America’s Three-Religion Pluralism*, “Review of Religious Research” 1962, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 37; P. Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice*, Oxford 2003.

⁹ Several factors apart from the internal crisis of the churches contributed to that. The abdication of the Protestant establishment of its role as a leading faith of the republic and its elite, the political rise of the fundamentalist Protestants which scared new liberals, an international rise in Islamic religious fundamentalist violence, deftly defined by new liberal elites as examples of generic religious violence, and finally a cultural shift towards

square in the United States, as empty of religious presence, corresponded with the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* in 1973, which provided the liberal-left camp with a secular "bible" for transformation of a society along the lines of progressive equality, defining at the same time the legitimate and illegitimate, rational and irrational terms of public debate. Legitimate discussion began to be understood as giving sufficient rational reasons, a.k.a. not religious, as a precondition of participating in the debate. This new liberalism began to base its discourse on a truncated, limited concept of rationality which excluded religious language from public debate. Religion was increasingly treated as an irrational pursuit ready to subvert the secular state. This was a subtle projection of the modern sovereign state's image of itself as an entity not tolerating any competition to its monistic pretences and defining only its power as legitimate.¹⁰

An amalgamation was looming of this new anthropological breakthrough, liberalism's limited concept of rationality, and the religious side's rationality as illegitimate and prone to violence, a dramatic problem of ghetto-type isolation of religion and religious people. It was not only a religious issue; it touched upon the fundamental issue of the citizen's freedom in the republic. It constituted a subversion of American tradition and converted pluralistic liberalism into a monistic ideology of revolutionary transformation, an act of symbolic violence towards religious people. They were told that their beliefs were to be separated from their personalities, as the beliefs of the secularists for some reason were not, and could enter the public square only as second-class citizens. This new development was a violation of the fundamental values of equal rights and religious freedom. But it also constituted the European Enlightenment-type attitude of the American liberal elites, a condescending attitude towards religion and American culture at that, and a declaration of war on a large segment of the American society. The program of "emancipation" signified a program of replacement of "oppressive" culture with a massive legislation for social justice for everyone who defined themselves, or was defined by the elites, as being "oppressed". Culture and religion began to be treated as an obstacle to the universal march of progress.

Neuhaus found himself in the middle of this conflict. He realized that politics was not the aim of human existence, as he remarked "the first thing about politics is to remember that politics is not the first things". Yet he was against writing oneself off from a society; there was no sectarianism allowed for Christians. The Church was not the sect and could not escape the world, but work out the best in the existing one. Neuhaus responded to the new situation of post-1968 liberalism with the book *The Naked Public Square* of 1984, which catapulted him into public

privatization of faith and loosening of orthodoxy, with a corresponding earlier shift to psychotherapy aimed also at the Protestant religious paradigm, all connected with the dissolution of communities and a spread of radical self-individualism.

¹⁰ On this fascinating process of "politicization" of religion by the modern sovereign state and the corresponding branding of a religious competitor as prone to violence see: W. T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, Oxford 2009.

prominence that same year. It “not only initiated a conversation, it began a movement”.¹¹ Probably the most important of Neuhaus’s books, it was

[...] a plea not for religion as such but for reasoned public moral discourse, which discourse must also and of necessity draw on the resources of religion ... [today] religious opinions are [still] viewed as being beyond reasoned discourse ... the liberal democratic tradition is a Western and Christian achievement and its future depends, for better and for worse, chiefly on the American experiment. If it dies here, I do not see anyone else picking up the fallen flag.¹²

The book was a manifesto against secularization of every part of shared common life. For Neuhaus this was a totalitarian move which would leave citizens without intellectual resources to resist the pretensions of the modern state.

The abortion decision of 1973 prompted Neuhaus to abandon his love affair with liberalism, limiting drastically its definition of those whom it would take under its protection and move into a cultural fight. This fight was fundamentally about the very definition of human freedom and human dignity, and religious freedom was a cornerstone of it. It was essentially a self-defensive move on the part of Christians. Liberalism, which was driving religion and religiously informed moral witnesses out of the public square and into the private domain, was for Neuhaus anti-freedom and anti-rationality ideology. He easily saw through the very dubious and ideologically motivated interpretations of the First Amendment by some judges and lobbying groups trying to push religious people into purely private quarters.

For Neuhaus, it was precisely the separation of state and church that religious communities were fighting for, while the state was dictating to religious communities their rightful place. The historical point of separation was not enlightened rationalism, but the growing realization among the various competing religious groups that it was better to neutralize a state in matters of religion than to run the risk of one of their opponents gaining control of the government. Thus

[...] we must never tire of explaining, [that] the ‘no establishment’ provision of the First Amendment is entirely in the service of the ‘free exercise of religion’.¹³

The “antiestablishment” portion of the First Amendment was not to defend a state and society against religion, but exactly the opposite, to defend religion against the state so as to provide security for religious denominations to function fully in the public sphere. But the situation changed. The Supreme Court decisions, coupled with a theory of the new anthropology of the imperial Self, had to recognize this Self as a sole arbiter of his or her right against community and other rights. The imperial Self was to be the arbiter of “rights”, “exclusions”, “intolerance”. Such a doctrine could not be an effective policy, but it was an effective ram to push

¹¹ Quotation from the back cover of *The Naked Public Square Reconsidered: Religion and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. C. Wolfe, Wilmington 2009.

¹² R. J. Neuhaus, *American Babylon*, New York 2009, p. 24.

¹³ Idem, *The Public Square*, “First Things”, November 2006, p. 78.

religious language and people out from the public discussion, in order to prepare quite a coherent doctrine of the new community. From that point of view, the Christian Right's entry into politics in the 1970s was a defensive tactic in the face of the aggressive liberal secular state. Its rise constituted a fight with the "onslaught of anti-biblical barbarism".¹⁴

Neuhaus was also convinced that religious denominations play an indispensable role in preserving freedom as such against any pretensions of a sovereign state.¹⁵ In the civil public square, democratic citizens participate not as "unencumbered selves" driven by the imperial Self, which was a cover for power and selfish will, but citizens who use reason and draw on the wisdom of the many traditions. Despite America being a commercial republic, its citizens have always tried to order their lives justly and pursue the common good. And if that common good was from time to time compromised, as for instance in the case of slavery, that internal logic of decent public life eventually prevailed. Neuhaus was thus a fierce critic of the ideology of "strict separationism" promulgated by secularists and other liberals who sought to use raw judicial power, so as to disenfranchise people of faith who do not share their convictions and who reject liberal pieties.¹⁶

Neuhaus was a public theologian of the first order, capable of translating the most intricate intellectual matters into clear statements. He was a driving force behind many important public initiatives. In 1990 he founded the Institute on Religion and Public Life. Its journal *First Things*, was an ecumenical journal attempting to provide a "survey of religion, culture, and public life", and Neuhaus was immediately recognized as a weighty contender by his intellectual adversaries. Its purpose was "to advance a religiously informed public philosophy for the ordering of society". The magazine has been seen since then

[...] correctly, as the intellectual organ of a certain kind of religious conservatism. It is not the conservatism of those who reject modernity, but conservatism of those who see modernity ... to be rescued.¹⁷

In 1995, Neuhaus also helped to create a crucial alliance between the Evangelicals and the Catholics, or, to be more precise, between the conservative evangelicals and the conservative, orthodox Catholics. Slowly the religious public presence as a civilizing cultural and social force in America had to be grudgingly accepted by liberal elites, marred only by one cliché, with the movement and its leaders, of which Neuhaus was probably the most important one, being called "theocons", as if suggesting that what America was about to have was a theocratic state despite

¹⁴ I. Kristol, *Taking the Religious Conservatives Seriously*, [foreword in:] *Disciples and Democracy: Religious Conservatives and the Future of American Politics*, ed. M. Cromartie, Washington 1994, pp. VII–VIII.

¹⁵ This idea was set forth by him for the first time in a 1976 pamphlet by P. Berger and R. J. Neuhaus, *To Empower the People*, Washington.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ S. M. Barr, *To Lit a Candle*, "First Things", April 2009, p. 20.

the overtly humanistic and freedom-oriented effects of such people's efforts. This constituted not such a subtle case of criminalization by association, when the very word "theocon" elicited images of a theocratic government like Iran, with ordinary life in certain aspects civilized, but with the horrible regime from the liberal-democratic point of view. This is why Neuhaus resented and resisted it.

His liberalism was definitely not a liberalism which accepted the New Left slogan of "emancipation" from all established forms of human existence, defining them as hiding unequal relations of power, thus making any human activity inherently political. Such "liberation" had no stopping point, since it lacked definite criteria of judgment and led to a morality of oneself. Neuhaus's liberalism rejected the idea that the imperial Self was to be the sole arbiter of one's destiny. His liberalism was the tradition of Madison, Tocqueville, or Acton, where liberty was more an achievement. He was against post-'60s liberalism embracing empty freedom, ignorant of evil, racing into nihilistic nothingness, liberalism as a pursuit of freedom decoupled from a search for truth, without any sense of human nature. He rejected its notion of tolerance rooted in the adulation of the imperial Self as a subject of moral judgment, as good as anyone. For Neuhaus genuine tolerance did not mean

[...] ignoring differences, as if differences made no difference; genuine tolerance meant engaging differences, energetically, within a bond of civility and respect...that commitment to differences engaged and explored must remain both watchword and method.¹⁸

Neuhaus was convinced that life was a serious, consequential business. His life constituted a paean for God-the Creator who could be approached by reason and reasoned about in public, and recognized the existence of an objective world, into which was written a meaning and a law of motion, which could never with impunity be changed. After St. Augustine he knew that created things should not presume to create. This world exists not only in our minds, or in culture, but is true objectively and filled with fullness, is rational and capable of being known. The message about this is conveyed by God, not by man. Neuhaus was a realist and a metaphysician. Metaphysics tells us that reality has a sense embodied in it permanently, the sense which is not only a cultural variable, that in human relationships and the nature of man there are written immutable principles and laws, which have to be read and implemented. Without metaphysics one cannot defend human dignity, which is the very reason why human rights should be binding. Metaphysics defends us against the hubris that a sense of reality depends only on our mind, which would have meant that who is a man and who is not is decided not by facts, but opinions. In other words that we are of our own making, a product of our will, power and self-explaining mind.

His was a rejection of such a modernity which dethroned God, because that would have meant the elevation of Man, in fact an invention of Man. The act of

¹⁸ G. Weigel, *Multiplying Himself*, "First Things", April 2009, p. 63.

Creation was to continue now without a Creator. God had created human beings in His own image and likeness out of the act of love, thus free. Humans thought that with impunity they could now continue the task and press that freedom to the utmost limit, while at the same time declaring as non-existent the very source of this limit. Man was now to be the centre of creation from which the meaning of that creation began to be decided. Humans owed nothing to God, everything to nature and biological chemistry in that, the crowning evolutionary element of which has become human reason. As Nietzsche observed, little was changed, except that the total inversion of the object of worship took place. Worship of God was converted to worship of humanity itself. The yearning for metaphysical dimension was not eliminated, as the modern mind claimed; it was just placed somewhere else. The deity was not the biblical God who was telling His created beings "You shall" because I love you. The new Deity was put in this place, and now it was "humanity", the modern equivalent of biblical idolatry, the religion of Me.

But secularist humanism as an ideology, Neuhaus argued, was not able to provide one crucial element of this manmade self-creation, that is the love with which the Creation was executed, and because of that of the absolute undestructability of any human life. Secularism was unable to be enforced metaphysically as a concept of equality putting everyone, because of it, within a circle of total moral responsibility, guaranteed by the taboo of God, which could not be reached by an act of will and power of anyone under any circumstances. To destroy that taboo mentally was a truly practical consequence of the death of God, and because of that the very concept of moral equality of all. Their belonging to the circle of moral responsibility was from now on dependent on the sheer imaginary, will, power and utility of humans and their power relations. There was nothing in them which could not be altered by self-justifying logic of a self-explaining mind, driven to utilitarian solutions rationally justified post-facto. This constituted the very essence of moral auto-creation. Love gave way to a certitude about the boundless possibilities of development in every field, with no guides to the limits of such an endeavor, inviting the hubris of deeming them non-existent, the very essence of rebellion against God which biblical imaginary defined as the fall. Love was equated with happiness as bliss. As in the great tale of Baron Münchhausen, humans began to auto-create themselves, rooted in the myth that they were self-originating and saving themselves from an abyss of a whirlwind of senseless cosmic drama, by their own will.

With that, the relational element in God's Creation, expressed by such a concept as the Trinity, or such images as God's need for company as a reason for Creation itself, or Adam's need for Eve, was destroyed. And with this destruction of a relational element of human creation and human nature, human solidarity was destroyed as well. There was simply no metaphysical need for it. Humans by the process of self-creation de facto rejected the need for dependency, the very essence of which was a relational bond with God, and unequal, that is dependent on someone else. Destruction of dependency gave a free hand to auto-creation, an invitation

to a belief in the endless plasticity of the world outside, and humans there as well, subject only to will and power. Metaphysical individualism gave rise to social and political individualism, the very essence of the American experiment, but historically tempered by metaphysical fear of God, as well as communities of well, biblically formed consciences, or in other words religious communities. Sternly inculcated morality gave rise to values and opinions which were from now on to become substitutes for religions, a.k.a. biblical morality, and form a new ethical behavior. Opinions, which are in fact a province of moral auto-creation, are in the contemporary world confused with conscience.¹⁹

Neuhaus was thus critical of the contemporary liberal idea of conscience, whether in public life or in religious life, not only for theological reasons, but for practical ones as well, for the sake of a viable community, democracy and freedom. The rule of conscience may ultimately isolate people, driving them deeper into themselves. A consequence is the subordination of autonomous institutions into a dictate of a state, meaning a minority elite in power and cognoscenti justifying it. If the individual conscience has primacy then we are bound to have incessant clashes which are ultimately irresolvable. They require arbitration, but also criteria for judging between them, a process which will be done not by the reasoned public argument of informed citizens with properly formed consciences, but by an imposition of such a judgment by narrow elites. Here, Neuhaus was Tocquevillian to the core.²⁰

The properly informed conscience is thus a prerequisite of the free society as it has been understood in Western civilization, which is essentially of Christian making. Neuhaus refused to accept the new post-1968 liberalism's adulation of the autonomous self as a carrier of his or her inner truth created in a process of moral auto-creation, and especially justifying it as the surest protection of minorities. Such a conscience does not search for virtue as truth, but virtue as personal identification. In such a case a change in traditional morality takes place. Virtue ceases to be who one is in relation to the objective moral world – not to what one should be, but what one defines oneself to be, what one personally stands for in the process of the conscience's work understood essentially as moral auto-creation. Moral responsibility turns out to be secondary and subordinate to the definition of one's identity, which in fact inexorably turns to an identification of desire, self-definition of the world, and morality identified as personal choices and as a consequence social causes.

Morality is thus connected more with supporting "good" social causes instead of opting for a proper, universal moral conduct, identification with an objective virtue, that is moral truth. But such a stance treats others who have different views,

¹⁹ For Neuhaus, after Newman and in congruence with the papal encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* of 1993, conscience works well if it freely adopts God's law, objective moral laws a basis of moral choices.

²⁰ R. J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square Now: A Symposium* – Stanley Hauerwas, Mary Ann Glendon, Harvey Cox, Alan Mittleman, Andrew Murphy, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Ralph C. Wood, Allen D. Hertzke, David Novak, Wilfred M. McClay, Richard John Neuhaus, "First Things", November 2004, p. 25.

not partners in a process of deliberating over the objective criteria of communal conduct, a search for truth. During that search people may err, but are part, and recognize themselves as such, of the common humanity oriented towards not themselves, but something which is essentially higher than their desires. When virtue becomes self-identification, as something one stands for, as an outcome of one's self identification, other people are treated essentially as people with unbridgeable views, also a result of their self-identification derived from their moral auto-creation. This causes those who do not identify with our choices and our causes to be demonized as a nuisance, as thwarting our will, as enemies, not people living in the same moral universe. A colossal process of demonization follows, and we are essentially in a conflict which has no moral criteria of adjudication, because there is no objective point towards which to turn. Those who do not share our point of view, whether these are matters of race, sexuality, relations between sexes, homosexuality or global warming, are not only wrong, but they are essentially acting against virtue, they are amoral, and thus not in the wrong, but simply evil.²¹

New Liberalism, based on this new anthropology of an imperial Self, is wrong exactly on the basis of the premises which will never achieve the intended results. It will have to end up defending the rights of every minority, eventually a minority of one, on the basis of a totally non-discriminatory approach to the claims made by such minorities against society. This is for Neuhaus the most egotistical equation of personal desire with rights against others and the community and a demand from the state to protect such desires. This constitutes a rejection of majority self-government and giving up power to the state and its governing elites focused only on providing individuals with rights, a kind of consumerism which destroys community, democracy and eventually freedom, subverting the very essence of the rights of consciousness based on such an idea. Neuhaus explained this in the context of the fight with religion, meaning essentially Christianity in the public square. Here he was especially derisive of the Supreme Court, which accepted New Liberalism's anthropology as the basis of its judgments.²² But the wrong anthropology is the basis of wrong morality and wrong politics, and eventually wrong life.

For Neuhaus, an improperly ordered conscience would eventually cause a slide towards despotism administered by the cynical elites, content with providing consumption. For him a regime was legitimate only on the condition that it allows properly formed consciences to flourish, and here the anthropology of the New Liberalism, if recognized as an official doctrine of a state, was destroying this conscience. It was wrong politics producing a wrong community and loss of freedom. *The Naked Public Square* was thus a warning that pushing biblical religion out was a zero-sum game. The non-religious side was creating a civilization dangerous to civility and liberty.²³

²¹ Idem, *Empty from the State*, [in:] *The Best of Public Square*, Michigan 2001, p. 152, or *Judgment Day*, *ibidem*, p. 164.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 25.

²³ *Ibidem*.

Neuhaus had an acute sense that contemporary Christians were on the defensive against the human rights culture which demanded that they not only respect other religions, but give way to them as well. His understanding of human rights was not dependent on the contemporary human rights liberal doctrine, which has become a pivotal point of the rhetoric of liberal internationalists. For them, Judeo-Christian tradition has nothing to contribute to understanding of human rights, as if the underlying idea of human rights was not dependent first of all on that tradition, and as if human dignity, that is free will and reason, personhood and moral choice did not reflect the very nature of the ultimate reality that is God himself.²⁴

Any account of human dignity sufficient for grounding human rights convincingly, excludes secular accounts of them. All are spurious and self-circular. For him, human rights without a metaphysical grounding have to succumb to a logic of secular rationality based on a modern New Liberal anthropology of an imperial Self. Without a metaphysical grounding of human rights in God's love and equal rights, Neuhaus claimed, the rational liberal mind will always find ways to justify the wishes of the strongest over the weakest, as the abortion culture testified.

Neuhaus was aware that the main fault line of conflict today is not a fight between faith and reason, the idea that liberal monism wanted to impose on public discourse, but one over the very nature of reason.²⁵

The modern liberal concept of reason is limited. As a consequence, there was simply no way that reasonable people need to resign themselves to a materialist, naturalist understanding of the universe. For him the claim that the only respected rational assumption is that nature is all there was wrong and incoherent. There is no conflict between reason and faith, but there is definitely a conflict with the limited concept of reason applied in public discussions today by late liberalism, and there is a conflict with non-reason as the reason of the entire post-modernist thought. What Neuhaus tried to do, together with other, less public theologians as critics of modernity such as Newman, Balthasar, Pannenberg and, in the American context, Murray or Schall, was to engage critically and publicly with that liberal and post-modernist truncated concept of reason and show how it deforms rationality and public life at that, with the negative consequences of contemporary thinking.

Neuhaus started with a basic question which stands at the beginning of any reasoned argument. This is a question to which the right answer results in properly organized public life, and also a proper understanding of religious liberty within that. The question is as follows: "Is Being as such, and all it contains in it, that is the cosmos, the first cause, laws of physics and human history, consciousness, ethics, love and hatred, caritas and indifference, and finally reason as such, an effect of blind fate, born without a definite Creator and changing in endless, senseless process coming from the chemical forces of evolution, a utilitarian response to an environment?" Or Being has sense and properly applied reason can discern it, even

²⁴ Idem, *A Formula for Despotism*, [in:] *The Best of Public Square...*, Vol. 2, pp. 227–229.

²⁵ Idem, *The Naked Public Square Now: A Symposium...*, p. 25.

by a sheer falsification of the pretensions of its opponents. The consequences of answering such a question one way or another are fundamental for both individual and public life. Even assuming that both positions are not possible to subject to a definite resolution, the conclusion can only be that the ontological status of both of them is the same. To wit, a religious person, for instance, is as rational as a liberal intellectual, and the latter's rejection of faith as a superstition can be turned around and thrown at him.

If so, then religion and theology have the same epistemological status, as a non-theological, non-religious language, to convey to us something significant and fundamental about the cosmos and human nature. Both constitute forms of rationality, except that the former language is wider, richer, while the latter is truncated. A skeptic might ask in relation to what one is wider and the other narrower. To which the answer is simple and present in Christianity from the very beginning, namely in relation to realization of the true potential of human predicament, the nature of which was set by outside love, that is outside rationality. This of course has grave consequences for the ability to construct any compelling universal ethic derived from the self-explaining reason as an outcome of blind fate. The liberal, monistic claim to exclude a religious, theological point from a public discussion is thus not only logically contradictory, as by the standards of plurality the liberal mind considers itself to be constitutive to its operation in the public place, but also politically dangerous, since it has to suppress liberty by eliminating competitive languages in the public square.

This was a core argument of *The Naked Public Square*, from which many practical consequences follow for public life, including the recognition of a theologically inspired reason as necessary in the public space, the legitimate place of religiously motivated citizens in the political sphere who have the right to act on their beliefs as rational, not superstitious ones. As such they constitute essences of their *persona*, not an ornamental hobby to be practiced in private, and the rational essence of a public language at that. Neuhaus was aware, as Murray before him, or his contemporary James Schall, that a theological statement per se was not a language in which one could engage public sphere directly. Thus, in his public pronouncements Neuhaus tried to convey his message in a language of rationality.²⁶ He used such a language because he considered reason to be part of God's creation, so capable of forming a universal language of human communication. This language of rationality is natural law, of which Neuhaus was a defender.²⁷ But Neuhaus's argument was not dependent on the validity of any sort of religious orthodoxy. He acknowledged a debt to the Catholic tradition influencing his entire understanding of politics and morality. But his public arguments concerning such issues as abor-

²⁶ Such language was demanded from the non-liberal side as a precondition of civilized public life by John Rawls in his famous, even if woefully reductionist argument of public morality formulated in *A Theory of Justice*. Neuhaus's argument is deeper, and above all truly inclusive.

²⁷ Together with such modern thinkers as Robert George, Russell Hittinger or John Finnis.

tion, euthanasia, and the proper meaning of the First Amendment were not sectarian, but put forth in the language of natural right rationality.²⁸

There was nothing uniquely Catholic about what he had to say about the consequences of liberalism's contemporary philosophy based on an autonomous imperial Self, who destroys civility in politics, since as Edmund Burke observed, without constraints, willingly and morally imposed on oneself and acquired through character formation, men forgo their capacity for civil liberty. This is logical because otherwise we have a self explaining itself reason derived from a materialistic revolution, which makes this reason, including consciousness, nothing more than an outcome of chemical evolutionary reactions.²⁹ But then such a justification of reason on the basis of a non-theistic explanation can only be utilitarian, allegedly the best manner of adaptation to the changing conditions. Such a reason can not justify its own ethical system which would go towards categorical "you shall", the problem which Kant realized with all its drama and tried to solve, albeit unsuccessfully, like all philosophical schools after him.³⁰

The combination of materialism and moral auto-creation has profound consequences. If all that is material, and nature is simply a matter from which no moral command can be derived, then there is need to apply will to that world, to pretend that we create, mold the world and the matter as such, that will is the moral operational course of action.³¹

Our creation, including moral creation, makes us the masters of blind fate; reality is just social construction; everything is there for grabs, for will to change it. We are in power, not the blind world. But this is of course an illusion, and even if that will tries to organize any common ethical standards, as Kant wanted to, this eventually becomes useless.³²

But two more consequences stem from such a materialistic conception of reason for public policy, and Neuhaus is aware of that. The first is that the strong have no reason to recognize the weak as morally equal, because there is no external measure to, without discussion, as the Ten Commandments demanding from God "You shall", impose a moral command to do so. There is only a utilitarian reason, which may always justify why, for instance, the weak have to vanish. Abortion, euthanasia, cloning, sexual regression, as Neuhaus termed sexual revolution, are

²⁸ In his later years he somehow modified his position about natural law, which he explained in *The Naked Public Square*... Instead of stressing the language of natural law he stated that he "would make the appeal more explicitly and insistently to the human capacity for reason, including moral reason. Natural law enters here, but somebody has to come up with a better term than natural law, which is too easily seen as a peculiarly Catholic thing". R. J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square Now*..., p. 24.

²⁹ *Idem*, *Science, Matter, Spirit, and Three-Card Monte*, and *Thinking About Our Thoughts*, in his *The Best of The Public Square*, p. 195, 203. This sort of argumentation is of course a famous Baron Münchhausen paradox, when the baron pulled himself out from a mire by his own hair.

³⁰ L. Kołakowski, *Kant i zagrożenie cywilizacji*, [in:] *Czy diabeł może być zbawiony i 27 innych kazań*, Kraków 2006, p. 185–197.

³¹ This is the logic, of course, of Darwin's and Nietzsche's argument, but long ago charted by Machiavelli.

³² R. J. Neuhaus, *Minding the Mind*, [in:] *The Best of The Public Square*..., p. 190.

a contemporary version of that inability of the liberal mind to justify its commands in a compelling way, because the utilitarian reason is ultimately in service of a desire. This is a process

[...] in which millions have been infantilized, encouraged to pretend that they do not know what they know, and to call the resulting confusion choice... The ontology ... lies shattered under a barrage of rights ... until all memory of design was lost in the immeasurable expanse of desire. [It was] the civilizational undoing, [which] is a moral undoing.³³

The second consequence is that within the perspective of such a conception of reason as the best adapting instrument, religion and religious people are viewed logically as a wrong evolutionary path taken by consciousness, something which, of course, Marx captured with his memorable phrase about religion being “an opiate of the people” and Leninists and the disenchantments school of all stripes term as “false consciousness”. In other words religious consciousness is a wrong track taken by evolution which led to a consciousness less efficient to adapt to reality. Such reason thus has to recognize religion and religious people as burdened not only with false consciousness, but redundant in that dimension of their existence, and many times causing problems. At best they were introducing the wrong solutions to human problems in public life, at worst they were conspiring to impose a theocratic government by fanatical methods based on violence. Thus, such materialists look at religion and religious people as enemies of public order, and for this reason suspicious and thus pushed beyond the public sphere.³⁴

This, as Neuhaus claimed in *The Naked Public Square*, is a monistic ideology since, in the case of Christianity at least, it means that a state has to come up with thoroughly secular and politically dangerous solutions. A religion-free public square is anything but neutral. It is filled by nostrums of relativism and nihilism and a claim to total moral autonomy of the imperial Self. Such a liberalism proves nothing, since it is based on self-explicating axioms. It creates them, and on their basis reaches social, political and moral conclusions. Such an ideology is wrong and has a totalitarian potential. For Neuhaus it was obvious that the wish to insert religious texts and religious authority into public life was simply a rational move, recognizing something correctly, namely the non-neutrality of secular reason. For him:

Secular humanism was simply the term unhappily chosen for “ersatz religion” and thus needed to be confronted as such, and by its erroneous anthropology exposed as wanting.³⁵

Religion is thus, argues Neuhaus, indispensable in the public square, since it is crucial for a self-definition of a human being, not in terms of contemporary notion of identity, but in a much more important sense of proper recognition of one's

³³ Idem, *Delicate Ground*, ibidem, p. 244–246.

³⁴ This was the gist of the justification for the US Supreme Court's decision “Everson...” of 1947, which changed the paradigm of thinking about religion in public life in American history.

³⁵ N. Frankovich, *The Aeropagus of Morningside Heights*, “First Things”, April 2009, p. 31.

station in relation to Being. In this perspective theologically inspired reason can tell us, for instance via natural law, something fundamentally important about the human condition. The secular reason of liberalism is definitely an important contribution to civilizational politics, but it can tell us nothing about first things as such, also in the communal, not only individual sense. As Neuhaus knew, secular liberal reason cannot justify itself, despite claims to the contrary, and cannot give reasons for its own permanence. Religion, at least biblical religion, is God's code in man, and the political project of liberalism is essentially subservient to that anthropological fact, an Augustinian observation. Neuhaus was aware that liberal reason and theological reasons were different, but nevertheless not equal. Liberal reason had a tendency to use politics as a way of shaping culture for its own aims, a particular vision of a social and moral order. Its basis is the modern idea of rights rooted in an anthropology of the imperial Self, kind of a modern Pelagian idea of self-salvation, a purely ideological axiom treated as the basis of human order, a kind of symbolic violence. For Neuhaus it was culture which shaped politics, and religion was at the root of culture, since it was religion, that is transcendental religion, that could only give a proper self-definition of a human being in relation to Being.³⁶

Modern monistic liberalism is thus fundamentally based on the wrong concept of anthropology on which it wants to base its ideal political and social order. Because of this anthropological error, visible for instance in modern human rights, it reverses the order of importance. For liberalism it is politics which should and can shape culture, and eventually religion, an official faith of legitimate and illegitimate public beliefs. This constitutes the highest form of modern state idolatry, a tolerance of only such religions which operate, as once the Roman religions, to the logic of the state defined interests. Such a liberal mind gives

[...] vent to its angry astonishment that anyone should challenge what they declare to be the consensus of the enlightened... *Our* world in which [others] must become like [them]. ... It is the new world of secularism's oppressive tolerance ... the petty intolerance of [their] infatuation with tolerance.³⁷

This was probably Neuhaus's most important contribution, an assertion publicly pronounced that religious freedom, and the transcendental presence of religion as an independent pillar of human existence and personal conduct of a properly understood citizenship, is a *sine qua non* condition of human freedom as such.

A less known but nevertheless important achievement was Neuhaus's Polish connection. Together with Fr. Maciej Zięba, Rocco Buttiglione, George Weigel and Michael Novak, he cofounded the *Tertio Millenio* seminar. This three-week seminar takes place every summer at the Dominican priory in the ancient city of Krakow. In its official pamphlet its intent was

³⁶ "I do ... believe ... that public life is mainly about culture and at the heart of culture is morality, and at the heart of morality is religion", [in:] *The Best of Public Square...*, p. VII.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 111, 113.

[...] to deepen the dialogue on Catholic social doctrine between North American students and students from the new democracies of central and eastern Europe.

The priory, founded at the beginning of the 13th century, was Neuhaus's home for sixteen summers in a row. From here he travelled around Poland. His main contribution to the seminar was his lectures, and a bottle known as "Jack Daniels, OP" for the staff. The seminar, taught by outstanding figures from both continents, was much more than just

[...] an exposure to Catholic social teaching, the thought of John Paul II, a vast ocean of Catholic culture, the friendship whose root is the lord ... with the Masses he celebrated [which] were the heart of the seminar.

As one of the American participants observed, it was about preparation for responsible freedom in the modern world, a school of rigorous thinking about life as a heroic activity, its gravitas, a warning about the trifle pitfalls of ubiquitous consumerism, to spiritual values of human dignity and solidarity, crucial to a just society. He called his students

Americans searching for the roots of liberty, Eastern Europeans so lately liberated to the authentic path of freedom and holiness, centered in the sacrifice of Christ, and raised the host to unite the group in a bond far stronger than argument. Over the years, as more and more young people came to be part of the First Things family, one of the first questions asked of them ... was "Were you in Krakow?" Thanks to his generous generosity in the service of God, Krakow will always be in us.³⁸

Neuhaus was in love with his faith because he was in love with freedom, and he was in love with freedom because he knew where its ultimate anchor was. Because of that, Neuhaus was a lover of life in all its forms, including cognac and cigars. A defender of the human right to enjoy them, he resisted the totalitarian pretensions of the mentally confused Savonarolas of the "religion" of healthy, meaning sterile, life, for lack of anything else worthy of believing in. If there was a Christian asceticism in Neuhaus, it was definitely not of its Gnostic type. It did not renounce this world and its pleasures, but embraced it, since "it was good". His most fascinating happiness lay somewhere else, but worldly pleasures constituted nice and important ornaments of life. After all, as he himself remarked, apart from a cognac with a good cigar, and of course friends,

[...] the two most enjoyable activities of mankind are gossip and metaphysics – the sparkles on the shallows of conversation about people, and the vast ocean of thought about reality, where the deeper you dive, the greater the darkness and the pressure grow.³⁹

³⁸ A. Chesser, *Neuhaus Invades Poland*, "First Things", April 2009, p. 25–26.

³⁹ R. J. Neuhaus, *Obituary to Irving Kristol 1920–2009*, "First Things", November 2009, p. 73.

Which, combined together and paraphrased a little, came pretty close to a remark by the eternal Gilbert K. Chesterton, that the two pastimes which distinguish a real man from a moron were drinking and religion.

This volume commemorates the person and achievements of Fr. Richard J. Neuhaus. It contains articles by various scholars on a subject so dear to him. Written from different perspectives, they contribute to an endless conversation about the civic public square and religion in liberal democracy. This is probably the most dramatic issue of late modernity, and it is within this circle of conversation that the fate of human dignity and freedom will be ultimately decided. Neuhaus was a distinguished participant in that conversation.

Last but not least, this volume is a token tribute of gratitude to R. J. Neuhaus from his Polish friends. They owe him the debt of meeting someone who understood their sensibilities, in significant measure probably, because of his Catholic culture and his American tradition of liberty. At the center of the Polish torturous and hard-won identity stands the universal value of freedom grounded in Christian heritage, so well communicated in the world by that great son of Krakow, John Paul II. Freedom of all and each of us. This volume comes out in Krakow, the ancient city of the Polish kings, vibrant with culture in the widest possible sense and fiercely intellectually independent. Neuhaus loved it, as he loved Poland. Many young people who attended his seminar carried with them a sense of participating in an experience transforming their lives, of meeting a teacher who led them not to himself but to something which is higher, to truth which provides real freedom. He knew that secret of a master teacher, that the deepest longing of the young, as Paul Claudel once remarked, was not hedonism but heroism. Krakow and Poland will miss him.